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AN ANALYSIS AND STUDY
OF THE
LEADING CHARACTERS
OF
HAMLET.

BY
OXON,

Author of "A History of the Reign of George III.," "A History of the Reign of George II.," and "An Analysis and Study of the Leading Characters of Macbeth," and "As You Like It."



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Dedication.

TO

HENRY IRVING,

OUR GREATEST LIVING ACTOR,

**WHO HAS DONE SO MUCH FOR THE INTERPRETATION
OF SHAKESPEARE ON THE STAGE,**

THIS VOLUME IS,

BY SPECIAL PERMISSION,

DEDICATED.

PREFACE.

THE author has endeavoured in this work to make the leading points of Shakespeare's character plain. He has carefully given proofs in the shape of quotations for every statement made. While availing himself of Cowden Clarke, Hazlitt, Hudson, and all the leading authorities accessible to him, he has avoided all extreme or eccentric views of the characters. Should the three plays published, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, and *As You Like It*, be honoured with the public favour, the author proposes to complete his *Study and Analysis* of the twenty-two plays now remaining, in addition to six others yet unpublished; and so complete an exhaustive work on all the leading characters of all Shakespeare's plays. No author has as yet done this. The three chief works on the characters of the plays contain the following: Cowden Clarke, characters of twenty plays; Hudson, characters of twenty-five plays; Hazlitt, characters of all the thirty-one plays. Hazlitt however is very brief on many plays, and often omits some of the chief characters.

ANALYSIS OF CHARACTERS OF HAMLET.

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HAMLET.

His Character generally.

“Staggering on to his goal,
Bearing on his shoulders immense,
Atlantean the load,
Well-nigh not to be borne,
Of the too vast orb of his fate.”

—*Matthew Arnold.*

Hamlet is a noble, generous, high-souled, and brave man. He has all the accomplishments, education, and refinement of a gentleman; and is a prince, not merely by rank, but also by reason of his nobleness of character. But all these ornamental qualities are not enough to make the Hamlet of this play. There are more qualities needed to make up the part of our hero.

These are—tenderness and devotion, remarkable insight and ability shown both in thought and word, love of truth, dashing energy, courage, and—above all—self-control and uncomplaining self-sacrifice.

I. HIS NOBILITY.

The chivalrous element in Hamlet appears in—

i. His devotion to Horatio.

This is well illustrated by that sincere and manly avowal of his regard for his friend, which exhibits so well the charming *bonhomie* and sterling nature of Hamlet.

"*Hamlet*. Horatio, thou art e'en as just a man
As e'er my conversation coped withal.

Since my dear soul was mistress of her choice,
And could of men distinguish, her election
Hath sealed thee for herself.

Give me that man
That is not passion's slave, and I will wear him
In my heart's core, ay, in my heart of heart,
As I do thee." (III. ii. 59-79.)

- ii. * His refusal to kill the King when praying. (III.
iii. 73 seq.)

- iii. His treatment of the players.

Hamlet receives the players as an equal, and sets them at their ease at once by recognising some of them, while he justly rebukes Laertes, who seems inclined to stand on his dignity and treat them as legalised vagabonds.

"*Hamlet*. Good my lord, will you see the players well bestowed? Do you hear, let them be well used; for they are the abstracts and brief chronicles of the time; after your death you were better have a bad epitaph, than their ill report while you live.

Polonius. My lord, I will use them according to their desert.

Hamlet. God's bodykins, man, much better: use every man after his desert, and who shall 'scape whipping? Use them after your own honour and dignity: the less they deserve, the more merit is in your bounty. Take them in." (II. ii. 505-15.)

- iv. His scene with his mother shows generosity and affection, for, in spite of all his apparent roughness, Hamlet loved his mother. We may especially note this in the tone of his entreaty to his mother after the appearance of the ghost of his father. (III. iv. 139 seq.) Esp.—

* This may perhaps be referred to another cause.

"Once more, good-night :
And when you are desirous to be blest,
I'll blessing beg of you.

* * * * *

I must be cruel only to be kind."

v. *His devoted love for Ophelia.*

Of this there can be no doubt ;—even those who doubt the genuineness of Hamlet's madness cannot resist such impassioned utterances as this over his lost love's grave.

"*Hamlet.* I loved Ophelia ; forty thousand brothers
Could not, with all their quantity of love,
Make up my sum.

* * * * *

Dost thou come here to whine ?
To outface me with leaping in her grave ?
Be buried quick with her, and so will I."

(V. i. 292-302.)

- vi. The opinion of the King, who acknowledges and takes advantage of Hamlet's generosity—

"He, being remiss,
Most generous, and free from all contriving,
Will not peruse the foils." (IV. vii. 135-7.)

Cf. the opinions of Ophelia (III. i. 158) and Fortinbras (V. ii. 408, 9).

- vii. His popularity with the public will confirm us in our high estimate of the nobility and dignity of Hamlet. This we gather from his mortal enemy the King—

"*King.* The other motive,
Why to a public count I might not go,
Is the great love the general gender bear him."
(IV. vii. 16-18.)

II. HIS ENERGY AND COURAGE.

We see these qualities on several occasions, though his energy is at times rather spasmodic.

(1) When he dashes fearlessly after the ghost, in spite of the opposition of his more cautious companions.

(2) When he conceives and promptly executes the play scheme.

(3) When he is the first to leap on board the pirate.

When he checkmates Rosencrantz and Guildenstern by the substituted letter.

(4) When he accepts the challenge to fence, and kills the King.

(5) When he saves Horatio by snatching the bowl from him, and saves his country by giving his voice for Fortinbras.

We see that like most really brave men he was not given to asserting the fact, but had great power in reserve.

“Laertes. The devil take thy soul !

Hamlet. Thou prayest not well.

I prithee, take thy fingers from my throat ;

For, though I am not splenetic and rash,

Yet have I something in me dangerous,

Which let thy wisdom fear.” (V. i. 281-6.)

Cf. II. ii. 598-602 ; V. ii. 370.

III. HIS SELF-CONTROL.

This is one of the most important points in his character.

We may say that duty was the mainspring, but self-control was the regulator of his character and his actions.

Had Hamlet not possessed this quality, Claudius would have been promptly killed, *but* his father would have been unavenged.

In spite of the “wild and whirling words” of his soliloquies, Hamlet, as a rule, controls himself in his acts.

Self-control—

- a. Made him check his love for Ophelia, and finally give up all thoughts of marrying one he loved so well.

- b. Restrained him from slaying the King, when he saw him rise in guilty terror and hurry from the counterfeited presentment of his crime. It also stayed his hand when he had him at a disadvantage on his knees.

IV. HIS UNCOMPLAINING SELF-SACRIFICE.

“ But break, my heart, for I must hold my tongue.”

Hamlet's position is a very painful one, because—

- i. He sees his father's murderer, and his mother's seducer, on the throne.
- ii. Every one is bowing down to them as the legitimate sovereigns.
- iii. He is surrounded with spies.
- iv. Even Ophelia, the woman of his heart, is used as a decoy.
- v. Horatio is the only man he can trust, and he is of little practical use to him.
- vi. He knows much that the public do not know, and therefore he cannot strike the King until he has proof to enlighten their ignorance.
- vii. Though he denounces himself for his fancied hesitation and cowardice as a “rogue and peasant slave,” he never complains of the task imposed on him by his father, and the conditions under which that task must be performed.
- viii. Though he loses his reason, his love, his interest in life, and his faith in humanity, his noble self-control forbids him to complain of his fate, and he obeys.

Cf. “Hamlet's apparent inaction is a prodigious logic. His supposed weakness has, in reality, the character of the heroic pathos of the antique tragedies, for here, as there, this weakness is a stormy struggle against the overwhelming pressure of an imposed expiation.”—*Klein*.

“This utter oblivion of self in his vast uncommunicable

sorrow is to me the most pathetic thing in Shakespeare."—*Hudson.*

Hudson notices that he is utterly unconscious of his noble qualities.

Of his intellectual powers he is conscious though not conceited.

V. HIS INTELLECT.

(1) His education.

- a. He is well read, and has thought out his knowledge well, so that he can handle his subject in masterly language. In illustration, we may quote his thoroughly sensible and able remarks on acting and literary style.
- b. We may also recognise in Hamlet a dialectic subtlety and capacity for philosophic reflection, which are marks of his university education at Wittenberg.

(2) His powers of reflection.

He moralises on life and death in that noble soliloquy :

"Hamlet. To be, or not to be : that is the question :
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
And by opposing end them ? To die,—to sleep,—
No more ; and, by a sleep, to say we end
The heartache, and the thousand natural shocks
That flesh is heir to,—'tis a consummation
Devoutly to be wish'd. To die,—to sleep ;
To sleep ! perchance to dream : ay, there's the rub ;
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come,
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
Must give us pause : there's the respect
That makes calamity of so long life ;
For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,
The oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,
The pangs of despised love, the law's delay,
The insolence of office and the spurns
That patient merit of the unworthy takes,
When he himself might his quietus make

With a bare bodkin ? who would fardels bear,
 To grunt and sweat under a weary life,
 But that the dread of something after death,—
 The undiscover'd country, from whose bourn
 No traveller returns, puzzles the will,
 And makes us rather bear those ills we have,
 Than fly to others that we know not of ?
 Thus conscience does make cowards of us all ;
 And thus the native hue of resolution
 Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,
 And enterprises of great pith and moment,
 With this regard, their currents turn awry,
 And lose the name of action." (III. i. 56-88.)

I have quoted this in full that we may read it not as a hackneyed piece of recitation, but that we may consider it from the point of view of the Hamlet I have depicted. Some think it refers to a contemplated blow at the King, and not to suicide ; but in any case, if we consider what Hamlet had been, and what he was suffering, and what a secret he and Claudius alone knew, we may discern a fresh meaning in it, even when read anew for the hundredth time.

His moralisings on the realities of life, the sense of honour that makes men "go to their graves like beds," and the vanity of all human greatness as he handles the skull of poor Yorick, have a pathos, a depth, and withal a simplicity, that Sterne, Marcus Aurelius, and Sir Thomas More have never surpassed.

(3) His wit and sarcasm.

Of his ready wit we quote a few examples—

"Horatio. My lord, I came to see your father's funeral.

Hamlet. I pray thee, do not mock me, fellow-student ;

I think it was to see my mother's wedding.

Horatio. Indeed, my lord, it followed hard upon.

Hamlet. Thrift, thrift, Horatio ! the funeral baked-meats
 Did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables."

(I. ii. 176-81.)

The interview with Polonius (II. ii. 171-218) exhibits Hamlet's wit and sarcasm, to which even Polonius bears witness.

"*Polonius (aside).* How pregnant sometimes his replies are! A happiness that often madness hits on, which reason and sanity could not so prosperously be delivered of." (II. ii. 212-15.)

By his discernment, and the sarcasm which gives utterance to it, he foils all his foes in argument, turns Polonius' clumsy fumbblings for information against himself, and flouts the old driveller to his face. (Cf. III. ii. 103-11.)

Cf. also the very pointed remark to Guildenstern, "Tis as easy as lying," and this passage:—

"*Guildenstern.* But these I cannot command to any utterance of harmony; I have not the skill.

Hamlet. Why, look you now, how unworthy a thing you make of me! You would play upon me; you would seem to know my stops; you would pluck out the heart of my mystery; you would sound me from my lowest note to the top of my compass. . . . 'Sblood, do you think I am easier to be played on than a pipe? Call me what instrument you will, though you can fret me, yet you cannot play upon me." (III. ii. 377-89.)

Again, in IV. ii. 11-22, he infuses into his sarcasm the bitterest contempt.

By his wit also, with the most irritating politeness, he ridicules the fanciful fop Osric. (V. ii. 81-181.)

(4) His common sense and shrewdness.

Common sense.—

We see this in his statesmanlike condemnation of the national vice of drunkenness on the grounds of taste and public policy.

"*Hamlet.* Ay, marry, is't:

But to my mind,—though I am native here,
And to the manner born,—it is a custom
More honoured in the breach than the observance
This heavy-headed revel, east and west,
Makes us traduc'd and tax'd of other nations:
They clepe us drunkards, and with swinish phrase
Soil our addition; and, indeed, it takes

From our achievements, though performed at height,
The pith and marrow of our attribute." (I. iv. 13-22.)

Here we see the future king,

"The expectancy and rose of the fair state,"

preparing for the duties of the throne.

We see also his common sense in his remarks on acting, in III. ii., especially in the following, which are not out of date in the present day :—

"And let those that play your clowns speak no more than is set down for them ; for there be of them that will themselves laugh, to set on some quantity of barren spectators to laugh too ; though, in the meantime, some necessary question of the play be then to be considered ; that's villanous, and shows a most pitiful ambition in the fool that uses it." (III. ii. 34-41.)

His shrewdness enables him to see through the pretended friendship of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, to suspect that Ophelia is a decoy, and to foil all the King's plots against him.

(5) His eloquence and power of invective.

His eloquence.—

We see this in his soliloquies—I. ii. 129-59 ; II. ii. 530 *seq.*

His power of invective may be illustrated from I above, and especially from—

"Frailty, thy name is woman !—
A little month, or ere those shoes were old
With which she follow'd my poor father's body,
Like Niobe, all tears :—why she, even she—
O God ! a beast, that wants discourse of reason,
Would have mourn'd longer—married with my uncle,
My father's brother, but no more like my father
Than I to Hercules." (146-53.)

See also his interview with the Queen (III. iv.), especially the lines,—

“ A murderer and a villain ;
 A slave, that is not twentieth part the tithe
 Of your precedent lord ; a vice of kings ;
 A cutpurse of the empire and the rule,
 That from a shelf the precious diadem stole,
 And put it in his pocket ! ” (96-101.)

Nor does his invective spare himself in II. ii. 576-616,
 and IV. iv. 32-66.

MAD.

A. Medical Evidence, 1-18.

B. General Evidence, 1-9.

A.—*Medical Evidence.*

1. Even before he hears of his father's murder we find him—

Unsociable	} Premonitory symptoms of madness.
Moody	
Contemplating suicide	
Brooding over his wrongs	

His wrongs are—his father's death, his uncle's accession, and his mother's marriage.

He wants elasticity, and so his first sorrow makes him moody and misanthropic, and turns his mind to suicide.

This is rendered more likely, if we suppose, with some, that he left his father flourishing, and on his return from Wittenberg found him dead, his uncle on the throne, and his mother married to the usurper.

2. His interview with the Ghost deranges his already unsettled mind, so that in his speech, I. v. 92-112, and the conversation with Horatio and Marcellus, we note these symptoms of derangement :

a. (Common in young people.) A hasty resolve to alter his whole life and seclude himself.

b. A strange mixture of jest and earnest.

On the departure of the Ghost his friends find him distrustful, and almost hysterical in his untimely jests.

Contrast the solemn language he uses to the Ghost when face to face, with the affectedly gay familiarity of his language after he is gone; *e.g.* "boy," "truepenny," "old mole," "the fellow in the cellarage."

Cf. Horatio's comment—

"These are but wild and whirling words, my lord."

He enjoins secrecy on his friends *seven times*. (I. v. 133.)

3. It is true Hamlet says he will feign madness, but that does not prevent him being mad when not feigning; and this is what he is at times.

He was partly mad before he said he would feign, and before he did feign, if he ever did so.

This mixture of real and feigned madness is often found.

4. His wild and silent interview with Ophelia (II. i. 77-100) was the natural result of—

a. His repulse by her in obedience to her father's orders.

b. The growth of his malady, which had begun to attract attention.

5. His letter to Ophelia, probably written before 4, is a genuine attempt to explain his feelings. (II. ii. 110.)

It contains these elements of madness—

(1) It is like a lunatic's vain attempt to explain his ideas.

(2) Its style is so like the letters of lunatics, that Conolly thinks Shakespeare must have taken it from the case books of his son-in-law, Dr. Hall.

6. Polonius' account of the stages of his disease—fast, watch, weakness, lightness, madness—agrees with the course of Hamlet's form of melancholic mania in medical experience. (II. ii. 147-50.)

7. His walking for hours together in a gallery alone, is also a proof of his brooding melancholy. (II. ii. 160.)

8. "O God, I could be bounded in a nut-shell, and count

myself a king of infinite space, were it not that I have bad dreams." (II. ii. 260-62.)

"I have of late—but wherefore I know not—lost all my mirth, foregone all custom of exercises; and indeed it goes so heavily with my disposition, that this goodly frame, the earth, seems to me a sterile promontory," etc. (*Ib.*, 306-11.)

These speeches are regarded as typical of melancholy.

9. His second interview with Ophelia is, from a medical point of view, alone an invincible proof of his madness.

10. His readiness to confess his melancholy is a typical symptom of the disease. Cf. II. ii. 260-2; and—

"Perhaps
Out of my weakness and my melancholy,
As he is very potent with such spirits,
Abuses me to damn me." (II. ii. 629-34.)

11. He makes no attempt to feign madness in his interview with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, whom he knew to be spies, though this was a good opportunity for creating a false impression.

12. Bucknill considers that he never appears less sane than when he declares in the interview with his mother—

"That I essentially am not in madness,
But mad in craft." (III. iv. 187-88.)

13. The tests Hamlet proposes in the same interview—a good memory and an even pulse—are no proof of sanity, because—

i. The pulse in melancholia and mania is not above the average in some people.

ii. Bucknill instances—*e pluribus unum*—a violent and mischievous maniac, who had the most brilliant memory he ever knew.

14. His sarcasm *v.* Polonius, whom he jeers in the most uncalled for way, are characteristic of lunatics, who often make a dead set against one of whom they have a dislike.—*Kellogg.*

15. Apart from this, Ray considers that no sane man would have thus satirised the father of the woman he loved.

16. His denials of his madness (III. iv. 141, 146, 187, and elsewhere) are not to be taken seriously, as they are common among lunatics.

17. Kellogg regards his intellect as strong and sound.

Kellogg regards his moral feelings and affections as disordered.

18. In the play-scene his conduct towards Ophelia shows he has quite forgotten his late treatment of her. This forgetfulness is characteristic of lunatics.

B.—General Evidence.

(1.) In Burton's "Anatomy of Melancholy" (first ed., 1621) we find the following characteristics of melancholy, all applicable to Hamlet: suspicion, inconstancy, judiciousness, wisdom, and wit ("for melancholy advanceth men's conceits more than any humour whatever"), rashness, pitilessness, homicidal, and suicidal tendencies: *tedium vitæ*." Burton had probably read Hamlet, and may have considered him mad.

(2.) To feign madness was a mad act, because it thwarts rather than advances his plans, and at once arouses the suspicions of the King.

Cf. "Madness in great ones must not unwatch'd go."

(3.) His inconsistencies are symptoms of madness.

He is stopped from suicide by God's canon against self-slaughter in I. ii. 131-32, in III. i. by dread of the unknown world.

In the first passage he believes in another world, in the second his views are agnostic, if not atheistic.

(4.) His conduct to Ophelia	} are invincible proofs of madness.
" " " Laertes	
,, language about the dead Polonius	

a.—His conduct to Ophelia.

No sane man—not being a scoundrel—much less a Hamlet, could have listened to that reminder of his love so touchingly, helplessly, and modestly expressed by Ophelia—

Ophelia. My lord, I have remembrances of yours,
That I have longed long to re-deliver ;
I pray you, now receive them.

Hamlet. . . . No, not I ;
I never gave you aught.

Ophelia. My honour'd lord, you know right well you
did :
And, with them, words of so sweet breath composed,
As made the things more rich : their perfume lost,
Take these again ; for to the noble mind
Rich gifts wax poor, when givers prove unkind.

* * * * *

Hamlet. . . . I did love you once.

Ophelia. Indeed, my lord, you made me believe so.

Hamlet. You should not have believed me ; for virtue
cannot so inoculate our old stock but we shall relish
of it : I loved you not.

Ophelia. I was the more deceived.

Hamlet. Get thee to a nunnery : why shouldst thou
be a breeder of sinners ?" etc. (III. i. 93-122.)

and then so cruelly thrust her from him. Well may Conolly say, "To suppose him feigning here seems impossible." Ophelia, who knows and loves him well, considers him mad here. (*Cf.* 158.)

In the play-scene he apparently affects insanity, or at least eccentricity ; but his affectation soon becomes reality. On the departure of the King and Queen and retinue, he still talks to Horatio in the same wild style of jesting and buffoonery, though his friend is in the secret.

Indeed, before the flight of the King, his language to Ophelia, omitted in popular texts, has become quite unworthy of his nobler self.

b.—His conduct to Laertes.

[*The King puts Laertes' hand into Hamlet's.*]

Hamlet. Give me your pardon, sir: I've done you wrong;

But pardon 't, as you are a gentleman.

This presence knows,

And you must needs have heard, how I am punish'd

With sore distraction. What I have done,

That might your nature, honour and exception

Roughly awake, I here proclaim was madness, etc.

* * * * *

"Let my disclaiming from a purposed evil
Free me so far in your most generous thoughts,
That I have shot mine arrow o'er the house
And hurt my brother." (V. ii. 237-55.)

We consider that Hamlet is no longer mad, after his return from sea. In this frank apology to Laertes he pleads his madness as an excuse for the wrongs he had done him. Here he is perfectly sincere, and has no thought of evading any responsibility.

Cf. V. ii. 75-80, where he expresses his regret *in private* to Horatio. It would be wholly unworthy of the straightforward and chivalrous Hamlet, after breaking his sister's heart and murdering his father, to plead insanity to Laertes with the cowardly hypocrisy of a modern murderer. If there is any honesty, manliness, and truth in Hamlet, we must condone his conduct on the plea of insanity.

(5.) Hamlet is not mad "right on end."

He has lucid intervals, in which he declares his madness, and mad fits, in which he denies it.

He is, as a rule, sane in his interviews with Horatio and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and especially so in his interview with the players.

In fact, we must conclude, with Hudson, that "his sanity and madness shade off imperceptibly into each other, so as to admit of no clear dividing line between them."

(6.) He may have meant only to act the madman; but his acting soon passes into stern reality, and he loses

control over himself. His acting, in short, is not acting. He thinks he is playing with madness, but it is madness playing with him.

Cf. His interview with Ophelia (III. i. 89-153), which begins with that beautiful line—

“Nymph, in thy orisons
Be all my sins remembered.” (*ib.* 89.)

But soon we see madness creeping over him.

(7) His soliloquies, fine though they are, are tainted with insanity. The self-invective is unfounded and insane.

They belong to his periods of paroxysm, and were, in fact, the means by which he strove to conceal the real state of his mind from himself.

“We see two entirely different Hamlets in different scenes, and we see him in constant alternation of hurried and lucid intervals.”—*W. W. Lloyd.*

(8) The difficulties of his position are enough to derange a man far less sensitive than Hamlet.

- i. He confides in no friend freely, though he knows so much, and so greatly needs advice and sympathy.
- ii. The pathos of his position—his terrible loneliness in a crowd, is enough to account for his derangement.
- iii. He is an honest man, surrounded by sycophants.
- iv. His hands are tied, and he cannot strike out boldly for want of proof. *Cf. p. 4.*

(9) His loss of Ophelia, either from her rejection of him or the necessity of avenging his father, sours, embitters, and maddens him.

“The spirit that ordained him an avenger forbade him to be a lover”—Hartley Coleridge, who quotes :

“For to be wroth with one we love
Doth work like madness in the brain.”—*Coleridge.*

Had he not resolved to suffer in silence and never reveal his terrible secret, he might have justified himself, and silenced all prying critics with the answer, “Wist ye not that I must be about my father’s business?”

NOT MAD.

I can produce no medical evidence on this side. Probably this is due to the fact that insanity specialists, *al*, mad doctors, are much better at detecting traces of insanity than sanity. In fact, it pays better to prove a person to be mad than to prove him to be sane—*exceptâ Mrs. Weldon.*

Seventeen Arguments to prove Hamlet was not Mad.

- I. He declares his intention of feigning madness early in the play, and carries it out, while in some places he openly disclaims his assumed madness.
- Cf. "How strange or odd soe'er I bear myself,
As I perchance hereafter shall think meet
To put an antic disposition on." (I. v. 170-72.)
"I am but mad north-north-west: when the wind
is southerly,
I know a hawk from a handsaw." (II. ii. 396-97.)
"Mother, for love of grace,
Lay not that flattering unction to your soul,
That not your trespass, but my madness speaks."
(III. iv. 144-46.)
"That I essentially am not in madness,
But mad in craft." (*ib.* 187-88.)
Surely we must give Hamlet credit for saying what he meant and doing it.
- II. The ablest man at court—the King—does not believe in his madness. It is only young women like Ophelia, old women like the Queen and Polonius, and mere supple courtiers like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, that think him mad.
- III. It was necessary for his safety to pretend to be mad. He knew too much. He had learned a secret which might be fatal to him, if the King knew he had learned it. He therefore feigned madness to disarm the murderer's suspicions—in short, to save his own life.

- IV. He feigned madness in order to be able to vent his splenic sarcasm with safety. In fact, this view regards Hamlet as a sort of court fool. From this Ross infers his timidity.
- V. If you deprive him of reason, there is no truly tragic motive left. If he is mad, he has no free-will, and so becomes a machine.—*Lowell*.
- VI. He feigns madness to evade his responsibilities, and enable him to play with life and duty. (*ib.*)
- VII. Horatio, his bosom friend, never notices or mentions his madness.—*Stearns*.
- VIII. His interviews with Horatio and the players,
His interviews with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern,
His letters to Ophelia, Claudius, and Horatio, } show him to be sane.
- If he were really mad, he would never have sustained his madness with one person, and dropped it with another.
- IX. His harshness to Ophelia was meant to reach the ears of her father, whom he knew to be listening.
- X. He is counted insane because he strips off the external conventional delusions from things, and lays bare the realities. In short, because he says what he thinks.—*Maudsley*.
- XI. To feign madness was natural to him, for he was by nature a dissimulator.
This tendency he may have inherited from his mother or his grandfather.

Cf. Hamlet. "You should not have believed me; for virtue cannot so inoculate our old stock, but we shall relish of it. I loved you not."

(III. i. 118-20.)

- XII. He was a dissimulator also by art.
In his interview with the players he shows that he is a good critic and a good actor too.
In that awful moment, after the King's flight, the first question he asks is—
“Would not this, sir, and a forest of feathers—if the rest of my fortunes turn Turk with me—with two Provincial roses on my razed shoes, get me a fellowship in a cry of players, sir?”
Surely he looks on his madness as a clever piece (III. ii. 286–89) of acting. So clever is it, that many mistake the portrait for the original.
- XIII. Until he declares he is feigning madness, no one suspects him.
- XIV. If madness means want of consciousness, he was not at all insane.
- XV. The real “feigning” is done, not by Hamlet, but by the courtiers, and, in a different way, by the King and Queen.
Hamlet tells the truth.
They speak and act lies.
- XVI. Hamlet says noble things in his soliloquies and so-called lucid intervals.
But on the appeal to medical experience, is this possible? We never hear of any good literary work or any speech of real power by the inmates of asylums.
- XVII. In his soliloquies he never utters an incoherent phrase. When he is alone, he reasons clearly and consistently.—*Clarke*.

THE DIFFICULTIES OF HIS POSITION.

i. *His Loneliness.*

- “The principal fruit of friendship is the ease and discharge of the fatness and swellings of the heart, which passions of all kinds do cause and induce.”

"The parable of Pythagoras is dark, but true, *Cor ne edito*—'eat not the heart.'"—Bacon : *Essays*—Friendship—27.

If ever there was an illustration of Bacon's essay on friendship, Hamlet is one.

Though he speaks highly of a good friend (III. ii. 59 *seq.*), Hamlet does not unburden himself to his only friend Horatio.

He never gets advice from him or takes counsel with him, or any one else. He forms no party and no policy. Popular though he is, he has no following. He stands, he struggles, he suffers alone. Indeed, we may say, Hamlet perished for want of sympathy.

ii. *His Surroundings.*

He was living amidst spies and sycophants, forced to bow down to the murderer of his father, and in daily contact with an adulteress—his own mother.

We know all, or at least nearly all, the facts. It is only your rough and ready German critic,—who takes Hamlet in his stride, and settles the question that perplexed Goethe to the last, in a sentence,—who knows all about Hamlet's motives.

At all events, we know the leading facts of the case, and can understand to some extent the motives and objects of the chief actors. Hamlet himself knew all, but Hamlet's public knew nothing. They accepted the King's death, and Claudius' succession and marriage to his widow, apparently as a matter of course. With them, ignorance was bliss ; with Hamlet, it was worse than folly, it was misery to be wise.

Hamlet suffered from within and without.

Within, the sense of duty unfulfilled, and the knowledge of his mother's sin, were consuming his very heart.

Without, the sight of the public applauding the crowned murderer tortured him, who alone knew him to be a murderer, while they did not want their belief in their monarch to be rudely disturbed.

iii. *The duty imposed on him.*

To add to his sufferings, his hands are tied ; he cannot strike for want of proof.

"He has not merely to avenge his father, but to put the usurper and seducer in the pillory."—*Schipper*.

If he had slain the King at the end of the play-scene, or when he found him trying to pray, why should he not be branded as a murderer and would be usurper?

As a murderer, because no one would believe the Ghost's story unsupported by other evidence.

As a usurper, because Claudius was apparently, by *de jure* as well as *de facto*, King, the throne of Denmark having been elective according to Blackstone.

He was forced to watch and wait in his misery till he could make "the King's occulted guilt unkennel itself."

When we consider all Hamlet's difficulties and sufferings, we may truly say of him, "The heart knoweth its own bitterness."

HAMLET'S FAULTS.

I have here summarised the faults that have been found in Hamlet's character. As I consider it only fair to state both sides of the question, I have illustrated several that are obviously at variance with my estimate of Hamlet.

1. Indecision.
2. Rashness.
3. Pessimism.
4. Treachery.
5. Cruel and cowardly sarcasm.

- I. Indecision in action : dilatoriness.
- ,, ,, faith—scepticism.

I. *A. Indecision in action.*

Hamlet is by nature a man of intellectual rather than moral power. He is better at thinking and uttering his thoughts than putting them into execution.

"Thinking too precisely on the event" is his failing, and he knows it. Hence he is so dilatory in avenging his father that a second visit of the Ghost is required to recall him to his sense of duty.

He loses sight of business at times, and indulges in irrelevant digressions when he ought to be acting.

Cf. His dissertations on the drinking habits of the Danes and on the art of acting.

Valuable though his remarks may be, they are not needed then. It is this indecision that prevents him slaying the King at the end of the play-scene, and also in the praying scene. The reason he himself gives is to be rejected as unworthy of Hamlet.

On account of this indecision and unwillingness to act, one German commentator calls him "a phlegmatic Norseman." Had he said a phlegmatic Englishman, he might have been more correct from his point of view.

Even without endorsing all these views of Hamlet's indecision, we may yet regard—

"Strenua nos exercet inertia,"

as the best motto for Hamlet.

B. Indecision in faith—scepticism.

In his soliloquy (I. ii. 129 *seq.*) he shows due respect for the truths of revealed religion ; but in III. i. 56 *seq.* his scepticism asserts itself. *E.g.*, Death is to him a sleep. The life after death is an uncertain dream. Conscience makes all men cowards. Men live on in this world because in their ignorance of the next they fear it may be worse than this. Otherwise they would commit suicide at once. In other words, it is only agnosticism keeps us from suicide.

Hartley Coleridge notes how this soliloquy has been quoted in condemnation of suicide in orthodox pulpits. I fear many a shallow pulpit wit has dilated and quoted in error the much misunderstood Shakespeare. Happily when he recovers from his mental disease, in that brief interval before his death, Hamlet returns to his faith in God's care of humanity.

Cf. Hamlet. "There's a divinity that shapes our ends,
Rough-hew them how we will." (V. ii.
10, 11.)

"There is a special providence in the fall
of a sparrow." (V. ii. 230-31.)

"Absent thee from felicity awhile." (V. ii.
358.)

This last shows a belief in heaven.

II. *Rashness.*

(1) *Rashness in action.*

In the scene with his mother (III. iv.), passion or madness leads him to forget himself, and make his one false step—the reckless thrust through the arras that killed Polonius.

Hamlet really thought it was the King, and this makes the act more reckless still. (Cf. p. .)

The homicide of Polonius had very serious consequences.

E.g.—It gave Claudius a hold on Hamlet.

It led to Ophelia's madness and death.

It made Laertes the implacable enemy of Hamlet.

It enabled Claudius to arrange the treacherous duel.

It led to Claudius' death, and, alas! to Hamlet's too.

(2) *Rashness in thought.*

Hamlet argues too readily from the particular to the universal.

He is too eager to make the inductive leap in the dark.

Because one man has murdered and supplanted his brother, he declares "the time is out of joint."

Because one unfaithful woman has married again with indecent haste, he jumps at the conclusion, "frailty, thy name is woman," while he distrusts even Ophelia, and in despair says :

"Man delights not me : no, nor woman neither."

(II. ii. 322-23.)

III. *Pessimism.*

Hamlet seems to have begun as an idealist, but afterwards to have degenerated into pessimism.

He is an idealist, who finds his ideal only an ideal, and

not a reality. His idol is shattered by the marriage of his mother, the revelation of his uncle's guilt, and his rejection by Ophelia.

Early in the play the hurried marriage of his mother alone causes him to utter this lament of premature pessimism.

"O God! God!

How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable
Seem to me all the uses of this world!
Fie on't! ah fie! 'tis an unweeded garden,
That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature
Possess it merely." (I. ii. 132-37.)

When he hears the whole truth, his belief in the goodness of mankind is gone, and he is plunged in utter despair. (Cf. II. ii. 242, 250, 306-24; III. i. 56-88.)

Taking a lenient view of his case, we may regard him as a refined, intellectual character, unsuited to the circumstances in which he is placed.

IV. *Treachery.*

(i.) *To Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.*

Hamlet is accused of treachery in substituting the letter so fatal to the courtiers for his own death warrant. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern knew nothing of the contents of the original letter, or they would at once have returned on losing Hamlet. Of the contents of the forged letter they were also ignorant, or they would never have gone on to England. Hamlet probably inherited this love of conspiracy. (Cf. p. 18, XI.) He positively revels in plots and counter-plots. (See on p. 19.)

Hamlet. There's letters seal'd: and my two school-fellows,

Whom I will trust as I will adders fang'd,
They bear the mandate; they must sweep my way,
And marshal me to knavery. Let it work;
For 'tis the sport to have the engineer
Hoist with his own petar: and 't shall go hard
But I will delve one yard below their mines,

And blow them at the moon : O, 'tis most sweet,
 When in one line two crafts directly meet.
 This man shall set me packing :
 I'll lug the guts into the neighbour room.
 Mother, good night. Indeed this counsellor
 Is now most still, most secret and most grave,
 Who was in life a foolish prating knave.
 Come, sir, to draw toward an end with you.
 Good night, mother. (III. iv. 202-17.)

(ii.) *To Ophelia.*

Hamlet trifled with Ophelia's feelings.
 He did not really love and respect her, as his cruel
 repulse of her (III. i.), and his conduct before the
 whole court in the play-scene shows.

V. *His cruel and cowardly sarcasm.*

a. *Cruel.*

His insolent personalities to an old man like Polonius
 show his cruel disregard for the feelings of others.
 The language he uses to the poor old man's corpse is
 repulsively brutal.

b. *Cowardly.*

If his madness, as some think (p. 18) is assumed that
 he may insult others with impunity, it does not say
 much for his honesty or courage.
 Though we find he readily snubs the courtiers, who dare
 not reply, in talking to the gravediggers he gets his
 answer promptly.

THE FORGED LETTER.

How far was Hamlet to blame for causing the death of
 Rosencrantz and Guildenstern?

We are inclined to justify Hamlet's conduct on the
 following grounds :

1. The question was not, the lives of the spies *v.* Hamlet's, *but* the lives of the spies *v.* the performance

of Hamlet's great task, *viz.* the avenging of his father's murder.

It was his duty to sacrifice them, in order to do his duty.

2. It has been suggested — Hamlet should have substituted some harmless instructions.

But — suppose the king of England had detained Hamlet pending further orders from Denmark. His fate would have been certain.

3. At least they knew that the journey was not for Hamlet's good.
4. When they lowered themselves to serve such a master, they must take the consequences.

They may be good enough men, but they are in the same boat with a very bad man, and so they perish with him.

“φῆν τοῦ συναλλάσσοντος ὄρνιθος βροτοῖς
δίκαιον ἄνδρα τοῖσι δυσσεβεστέροις.
ἐν παντὶ πράγει δ' ἔσθ' ὁμιλίας κακῆς
κάκιον οὐδέν, καρπὸς οὐ κομιστέος.

—*Æsch.* : Sc. I. 593-96.

5. As I have shown, they were ignorant of the nature of the genuine and of the forged letter. The King keeps them completely in the dark, and they are quite content to continue so, and obey his orders implicitly.

It is really the King and their own servility that is the cause of their death.

The following are various views of the Ruling Principle in Hamlet, and the Key to the play :

THE KEY TO THE PLAY AND TO THE LEADING CHARACTER.

1. “A cruel, treacherous, and unscrupulous murderer, who can only be excused on the plea of insanity.”—*Stevens.*
2. “A morbidly imaginative man, living in a world of his own.”—*Coleridge.*

3. "A man striving to do his duty, but failing through indecision and through circumstances."—*Richardson*.
4. "A man with many good qualities, but a speculator who wants backbone to make him act."
5. "Hamlet is a psychological exercise and study."—*Maginn*.
6. "A man of genius, mad in some points and not in others."—*Strachey*.
7. "Hamlet has too much philosophic breadth of view, and does not confine himself closely enough to the task in hand. He is an unwilling avenger."—*Moberly*.
8. "Hamlet is blinded with excess of light."—*H. Coleridge*.
9. "He is a youth of tongue, not a man of performance ;
 . . . a giant in intellect, a dwarf in will."—*Ross*.
10. "Hamlet is a pessimist."—*Tyler*.
11. "A great deed is laid upon a soul unequal to the performance of it."—*Goethe*.
12. "He is the hero of suffering. A philosopher of death—a scholar of the night."—*Boerm*.
13. "The tragedy of the intellect."
14. "The tragic root of this deepest of all tragedies is secret guilt."—*Klein*.
15. "Hamlet is the great poem upon the opposition and reconciliation of necessity and human freedom."—*Gervinus*.
16. "The Hamlets are always too late."
17. "The apparent impossibility of convicting the guilty person constitutes the cardinal point in Hamlet."—*Werder*.
18. "An artist whom evil chance has made a prince, whom worse chance has made an avenger of crime, and who, destined by nature for genius, is condemned by fortune to madness and unhappiness."—*Taine*.
19. "His talents are his ruin."—*Bodenstedt*.

20. "A beautiful, pure, and noble nature, lacking strength of nerve."

Goethe has said of the Hamlet question—"After all is said, that weighs upon my soul like a gloomy problem."

But for all these suggestions we cannot consider the Hamlet question solved yet, and we bid adieu to the commentators and would be solvers in the words of Tennyson—

"Thou hast not gained a real height,
Thou art not nearer to the light,
Because the scale is infinite."

OPHELIA.

"The sweetest phantom that ever wailed her woes in hearing of a poet's brain."—*Coleridge*.

Ophelia is a pure and noble angel.

As a daughter, she is obedient and affectionate.

As a lover, she is forgiving, devoted, and dignified.

Hers is a tender, pliant, and submissive, rather than a clever, incisive, and independent mind.

We do not admire her in wonder, as we admire the splendid Portia; but she excites in our mind the love and pity we feel for a Desdemona, a Constance, or an Imogen.

In the case of Portia, our admiration is excited; in the case of Desdemona, our sorrow is modified by satisfaction at the discovery and death of Iago; but in the case of Ophelia, where no one seems to blame, and all is pure misfortune, as we read of her madness, her death, her funeral, and the touching requiem of the Queen—

"Queen. Sweets to the sweet : farewell !

[*Scattering flowers.*

I hoped thou should'st have been my Hamlet's wife ;

I thought thy bride-bed to have deck'd, sweet maid,

And not have strewed thy grave" (V. i. 266-69)—

our eyes are filled with tears, and our heart is stirred to its depths.

1. *Her obedience.*

This is one of the most charming and most touching traits in her character.

In her implicit obedience to her father, she—

- a. Repulses the man she loves and trusts.
- b. Allows herself to be used as a decoy, to lead him to reveal the cause of his madness to the ears of the “lawful espials,” Claudius and Polonius.

Thus, by her father’s command, Ophelia is degraded to a Delilah. Surely filial obedience can no further go.

- c. She allows herself to act a false part, to pretend to be reading casually, and so come upon Hamlet by accident, while she even tells “her docile little lie” (Dowden), when she says her father is at home. (III. i. 130.)

2. *Her dignity.*

Her dignity and self-respect are shown in her replies to Hamlet (in III. i.), when she returns his presents, and also in the play-scene.

“*Ophelia.* My lord, I have remembrances of yours,
That I have longed long to re-deliver ;
I pray you, now receive them.

Hamlet.

No, not I ;

I never gave you aught.

Ophelia. My honoured lord, you know right well you did :

And, with them, words of so sweet breath composed
As made the things more rich : their perfume lost,
Take these again ; for to the noble mind
Rich gifts wax poor, when givers prove unkind.”

(III. i. 93-101.)

In this scene her replies show us that all Hamlet’s mad suggestions fall harmless from her armour innocence.

3. *Her sweet and forgiving nature.*

Only once is there the slightest touch of bitterness or reproach in her words—when she rebuked her brother for

setting up a high standard of virtue for others in a spirit of pharisaism.

“*Ophelia*. But, good my brother,
Do not, as some ungracious pastors do,
Show me the steep and thorny way to heaven ;
Whiles, like a puff’d and reckless libertine,
Himself the primrose path of dalliance treads,
And recks not his own rede.” (I. iii. 46-51.)

Perhaps, with a woman’s wit, she understood the weakness of Laertes. Polonius also seems to confirm her doubts as to the moral perfection of Laertes. (Cf. II. i. 61.)

She never retaliates when Hamlet breaks out in his violence. (III. i.) Her only replies are prayers for her lover.

The spirit of “Father, forgive them : for they know not what they do,” is the spirit that breathes through her prayers for Hamlet—prayers that are indeed blessings.

“O, help him, you sweet heavens.”
“O heavenly powers, restore him.”

4. *Her purity.*

Such a subject is almost sacred.

Her language and bearing throughout point to perfect innocence.

- i. She had sufficient knowledge of the world to know of the existence of sin, as her answer to her brother (quoted above) shows.

This is quite consistent with perfect innocence. Indeed, it may be maintained that those who know nothing of evil cannot be virtuous in the highest sense.

In favour of this, Cowden Clarke aptly quotes from Chaucer—

“I say not she knew no evil
Then had she known no good,
So seemeth me.”

- ii. In her eloquent and pathetic lament over her lost lover she touches on no sensual beauties.

“*Ophelia*. O, what a noble mind is here o’erthrown !
 The courtier’s, soldier’s, scholar’s, eye, tongue, sword ;
 The expectancy and rose of the fair state,
 The glass of fashion and the mould of form,
 The observed of all observers, quite, quite down !
 And I, of ladies most deject and wretched,
 That suck’d the honey of his music vows,
 Now see that noble and most sovereign reason,
 Like sweet bells jangled, out of tune and harsh ;
 That unmatch’d form and feature of blown youth
 Blasted with ecstasy : O, woe is me,
 To have seen what I have seen, see what I see !”
 (III. i. 158-69.)

iii. As regards two of the snatches sung by Ophelia in her madness, it is enough to say that it is a well-known fact that the most pure, modest, and delicately nurtured women sometimes in madness use the vilest language.

In fact, it is people of this class who are most prone to such outbreaks ; so that in Ophelia’s case we may regard it as an indirect proof of her purity.

iv. The Queen (*cf.* III. i. 40) and Laertes fully believed in her innocence.

5. *Her madness.*

Her madness is caused by—

Hamlet’s madness.

The thought that her repulse may have made him mad.
 Her father’s death.

Here we see the depth of her love for Hamlet and for her father. Her heart is broken, her love is lost for ever. Finally her father’s death upsets that loving, angelic being, and her reason gives way completely.

Cf. this touching picture of her sufferings.

“*Gentleman*. She is importunate, indeed distract :
 Her mood will needs be pitied.

* * * * *

She speaks much of her father ; says she hears

There's tricks i' the world; and hems, and beats her heart;
Spurns enviously at straws; speaks things in doubt;
That carry but half sense." (IV. v. 2-7.)

How truly deep, in reference to the play and to herself,
is the irony of these words of Ophelia—

"Lord, we know what we are, but know not what we may
be." (*ib.* 41.)

Well does Laertes describe the mighty, moving power of
poor crazy Ophelia's helpless frenzy—

"Hadst thou thy wits, and didst persuade revenge,
It could not move thus." (IV. v. 168 69.)

The following arguments have been advanced by Tieck
and Goethe, who doubt the purity of Ophelia :

Tieck. 1. It is only thus we can account for Hamlet's
rudeness (III. i.), her sufferings and mad-
ness.

2. Her answer to her brother is not the answer
of an innocent maiden. To her father she
is more reticent.

3. Hamlet's language to her in the play-scene
before the courtiers shows that she had
forfeited his respect.

4. Laertes alludes to her fall from virtue in the
line—

"Hell itself she turns to favour and to
prettiness."

Goethe. 5. Infers her fall from virtue from some of her
allusions in her madness.

If these slanders are not self-refuted, we will answer them
with the words of Ophelia's brother—

"I tell thee, churlish priest,
A ministering angel shall my sister be,
When thou liest howling." (V. i. 263-65.)

If ever there was a case of tragic pathos and inevitable
fate, it is that of Ophelia. She loves her father, and is

bound to obey him ; she loves Hamlet, and is ordered by her father to repulse him. She does her duty, and Hamlet seems to her to become mad from her repulse. Then Hamlet in his madness slays her father, and thus she indirectly seems to contribute to his death. She is now cut off from the two persons she loves best in the world, and so henceforth life and reason are to her a blank ; and she totters on helpless, hopeless, and irresponsible to her watery grave beneath the willow of lovers forlorn. The sequence of events is painfully perfect and perfectly tragic, and we can find no flaw in them, and no "might have been" for consolation. We must, alas ! weep over Ophelia as the saddest, sweetest, and most innocent of victims, whom nothing could have saved, while our only consolation is that this poor soul, whose simple devotion to those she loved was her doom, is gone to rest where "they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are as the angels of God in heaven."

THE QUEEN.

The Queen is a woman who has fallen before the arts of a clever, able, and fascinating man.

Her great fault is weakness of resolution.

Hence—before the play she was seduced by the adulterer, and married him immediately after her husband's death.

When reproached with her sin by Hamlet, and implored to sever her connexion with her first husband's murderer, she cannot do so, and afterwards appears in the same relation with Claudius as before her son's impassioned appeal.

Her repentance.

There is a tone of refined sadness in almost all her speeches, which suggests that she had a burden on her mind.

She readily confesses her guilt to Hamlet—

"O Hamlet, speak no more :

Thou turn'st mine eyes into my very soul ;
And there I see such black and grained spots
As will not leave their tinct.

* * * * *

D

O, speak to me no more ;
 These words, like daggers, enter in mine ears ;
 No more, sweet Hamlet." (III. iv. 88-98.)

Her sufferings.

She suffered from a guilty conscience for these obvious reasons :

She had committed adultery.
 She had remarried with indecent haste.
 She had cast a slur on her son by her misconduct.
 She was injuring him by living as the wife of one
 who apparently had supplanted him, if he had not
 actually deprived him of the throne.
 She stands in a false position, as regards her son ;
 and, when she knew Claudius was a murderer,
 as regards her dead husband.

" *Queen.* To my sick soul, as sin's true nature is,
 Each toy seems prologue to some great amiss :
 So full of artless jealousy is guilt,
 It spills itself in fearing to be spilt." (IV. v. 17-20.)

These lines represent her state of anxious unrest throughout the play.

The death of Polonius by Hamlet's hand, and the madness of Hamlet and Ophelia, along with the latter's death, were blows that her sensitive nature felt keenly.

Good points.

There is something very tender, charming, and loving about the Queen.

She seems to have softened every one with whom she comes in contact ; *e.g.*,

Her dead husband, though so deeply wronged by her, hardly utters a reproach against her, and will not allow Hamlet to harm her.

" But, howsoever thou pursuest this act,
 Taint not thy mind, nor let thy soul contrive
 Against thy mother aught." (I. v. 84-6.)

Cf. III. iv. 109-12.

The King is always polite, and sometimes even tender in his language to her.

Hamlet, bitter though his resentment, and furious though his passion is, never forgets that she is his mother.

Before his interview of denunciation and reproach, he says to himself—

“Soft ! now to my mother.

O heart, lose not thy nature ; let not ever

The soul of Nero enter this firm bosom.”

(III. ii. 410-12.)

During the interview he shows her quite as much consideration as she deserved.

Ophelia seems to have been much attached to her.

Hence in her madness she is so importunate to see her. That this attachment was equally felt by the Queen may be inferred from her words at the grave.

Another proof of her womanly sympathy and charity is found in her account of that melancholy maiden's death.

Judging from the language of the gravediggers (V. i.) and the priest, we cannot doubt that she committed suicide by throwing herself into the stream. But the Queen charitably omits all allusion to suicide in her account of her death.

Indeed the Queen's beautiful words over her grave—words, the saddest and the sweetest in the play—throw a halo of womanly tenderness and beauty round the character of Gertrude, such that the sternest moralist cannot deny its charm. Throughout the play her language has a sadness and beauty peculiarly its own, and so reflects her character ;
e.g.—

“To draw apart the body he hath kill'd :
O'er whom his very madness, like some ore
Among a mineral of metals base,
Shows itself pure ; he weeps for what is done.”

(IV. i. 24-7.)

“This is mere madness :
And thus awhile the fit will work on him ;
Anon, as patient as the female dove,
When that her golden couplets are disclosed,
His silence will sit drooping.” (V. i. 307-11.)

Cf. The beautiful and sympathetic description of Ophelia's death. (IV. vii. 166-83.)

Hudson's estimate of the Queen is excellent :

"In her tenderness towards Hamlet and Ophelia we recognise the virtues of the mother, without in the least palliating the guilt of the wife ; while the crimes in which she is a partner almost disappear in those of which she is the victim."

Her innocence of the King's murder.

Gertrude was in no sense an accomplice of Claudius. Of her husband's murder she knew nothing, till Hamlet denounced Claudius as a murderer.

Proofs of her innocence.

1. The Ghost says nothing of her guilt.
2. Hamlet, in III. iv. would not have merely denounced her second marriage, had he considered her guilty of murder, a far more heinous crime.
3. The King never treats her as an accomplice. Indeed she is by no means the sharer of all his secrets.
4. She never lets drop a word from which her guilt can be inferred.
5. If she were an accomplice in the least degree, her conscience, which has great power over her, would have made her show it.
6. If she were guilty, her consummate self-command in concealing that fact entitles her to be regarded as the strongest character in the play, whereas in all other respects she is one of the weakest.

POLONIUS.

Polonius may be considered from the point of view of—

His faults.

His strong points.

A.—His faults and follies.

He is a meddlesome, conceited, pedantic old idiot, who is better at platitude than practice.

B.—His strong points.

He is a shrewd, supple, time-serving courtier and man of the world, with no very high level of morality, and little sense of honour. Johnson rightly speaks of him as "knowing in retrospect and ignorant in foresight."

He has also been described as—

"A venerable man, haunted by the spectre of his departed abilities."

Tieck sees in him—

"A real statesman—discreet, politic, keen-sighted, and ready at the council board."

It is possible he knew something of the relations of Gertrude and Claudius before the late king's death, and may have had a hand in putting Claudius on the throne.

*A.—His faults and follies.**i. His meddlesomeness.*

This appears in his—

a. Desire to pry into the private life of his son at Paris.

b. Eaves-dropping in III. i.

c. Fatal eaves-dropping behind the arras in III. iv.

"Thou wretched, rash, intruding fool, farewell."
(*ib.* 31.)

ii. His conceit and pedantry.

This appears in his laboured twaddle in II. ii. ; e.g.,—

"My liege, and madam, to expostulate
What majesty should be, what duty is,
Why day is day, night night, and time is time,
Were nothing but to waste night, day, and time.
Therefore, since brevity is the soul of wit"
(etc., *ad nauseam*). (*ib.* 86-90.)

He shows his density in quoting a proverb that tells so strongly against himself.

He also shows his conceit in his own penetration in—

“Hath there been such a time—‘I’d fain know that—
That I have positively said ‘’Tis so,’
When it proved otherwise?” (II. ii. 153-5.)

“If he love her not
And be not from his reason fall’n thereon,
Let me be no assistant for a state,
But keep a farm and carters.” (*ib.* 165-68.)

Here again he is an unconscious self-satirist, and we are tempted to wish that the king had taken him at his word.

We see his pedantry from—

His criticisms on Hamlet’s letter. (II. ii. 110-11.)
His criticisms on the player’s speech. (II. ii. 489-90.)
The statement of the stages of Hamlet’s madness.
(II. ii. 148-51.)
The description of the players. (II. ii. 415-21.)

B.—The strong points of his character.

As a man of the world—

His advice to Ophelia (I. iv. 115-35) is the advice of common sense, not of high principle. There is no appeal to religion, to the higher laws of right and wrong, or to her self-respect as a lady; but simply to the customs of society and the way of the world.

His advice to Laertes is of the same standard. It is the advice of a gentleman, and of one who has been “through the mill” himself—the advice of a hardened old colonel to his son about to join his regiment for the first time; but it is not the advice of a man of high Christian principle.

“Give thy thoughts no tongue,
Nor any unproportion’d thought his act.
Be thou familiar, but by no means vulgar.
Those friends thou hast, and their adoption tried,
Grapple them to thy soul with hoops of steel;

But do not dull thy palm with entertainment
 Of each new-hatch'd, unfledged comrade. Beware
 Of entrance to a quarrel, but being in,
 Bear't that the opposed may beware of thee.
 Give every man thy ear, but few thy voice ;
 Take each man's censure, but reserve thy judgement.
 Costly thy habit as thy purse can buy,
 But not express'd in fancy ; rich, not gaudy ;
 For the apparet oft proclaims the man,
 And they in France of the best rank and station
 Are of a most select and generous chief in that.
 Neither a borrower nor a lender be ;
 For loan oft loses both itself and friend,
 And borrowing dulls the edge of husbandry.
 This above all : to thine ownself be true,
 And it must follow, as the night the day,
 Thou canst not then be false to any man."

(I. iii. 59-80.)

We quote it as an excellent illustration of Polonius' knowledge of the world and shrewdness, which we can see are based on the long experience of a self-possessed and successful old man. The last three lines are often quoted by moralists as an excellent piece of advice ; but they are not so fine as they look.

They really show us that his highest morality was mere selfishness.

"To thine own self be true," simply means, take care of number one.

"Every one for himself, and God for us all," is the motto of Polonius, though I fear God had little place in his thoughts.

The truth is, the greatest men have always been the least selfish, and Polonius' advice might be quoted in favour of the meanest acts of self-aggrandisement. Had he said—

"Be true to the eternal laws of right and wrong ; be true to God and your own conscience," we might have rated his character more highly, though perhaps we ought not to expect such an appeal from the successful favourite of a corrupt court.

As a courtier—

He orders Ophelia to have nothing more to do with Hamlet, either because it might get himself into trouble with the King, who regarded Hamlet with suspicion, or because he did not think Hamlet's intentions were honourable.

Afterwards he finds he is mistaken on the latter point, and then regrets his excessive caution.

“*Polonius.* That hath made him mad.
I am sorry that with better heed and judgement
I had not quoted him : I fear'd he did but trifle,
And meant to wreck thee ; but, beshrew my jealousy !
By heaven, it is as proper to our age
To cast beyond ourselves in our opinions
As it is common for the younger sort
To lack discretion.” (II. i. 110-17.)

But to the King he claims it as a merit that he ordered his daughter to reject Hamlet's advances, though, as we see, he had just been regretting his excessive caution in doing so.

Well may Cowden Clarke remark, “How accurately does all this shuffling and moral imbecility square with the temporising courtier !”

It is probable he overlooks Hamlet's rude sarcasms because he considers the remarks of a lunatic unworthy of notice.

Or perhaps we may ascribe this to the deference of a courtier.

His Love of intrigue and want of a sense of honour—

These appear in his contemptible instructions to his servant to play the spy on his young master Laertes when in Paris. Not only is Reynaldo ordered to act as a spy, but also to pretend he knows Laertes only slightly, and to tell lies about his doings in Denmark, that his friends may be induced to tell secrets about him in Paris. (II. i.)

To a man of honour and a gentleman the whole thing is sickening. Here Polonius sinks far below the level of our old colonel, and indeed we can gather his love of indirect dealing from his own lips :

(*Polonius to Reynaldo.*) "See you now ;
 Your bait of falsehood takes this carp of truth :
 And thus do we of wisdom and of reach,
 With windlasses and with assays of bias,
 By indirections find directions out :
 So by my former lecture and advice,
 Shall you my son. You have me, have you not ?"
 (II. i. 62-8.)

Let us hope Reynaldo had not.

He teaches Ophelia to deceive by making her pretend (III. i. 44-6) to be casually reading as she comes upon Hamlet, and tell a lie—that her eaves-dropping father is at home.

LAERTES.

He is a wild, hot-headed, and hot-blooded young man, impetuous, brave, and energetic, with a certain punctilious sense of honour. The great stain on his character is his treacherous conspiracy *v.* Hamlet ; he listened to the voice of the tempter, and the lion became the servant of the serpent.

We see he is a man of strong affection, as his love for his father and his sister shows.

His hot-headed impetuosity.

We see this in his prompt return from France on hearing of his father's death.

He was impetuous in thought as in action.

Cf. his rash assumption that the King murdered his father, and the reckless fury with which he comes, supported by a horde of rebels,

"to beard

The lion in his den, the Douglas in his hall."

There is a ring of fearless frankness about this speech, that makes us admire the dashing Laertes for all his faults.

"*Laertes.* How came he dead? I'll not be juggled with :

To hell, allegiance ! vows, to the blackest devil !
 Conscience and grace, to the profoundest pit !

I dare damnation. To this point I stand,
That both the worlds I give to negligence,
Let come what comes ; only I'll be revenged
Most thoroughly for my father." (IV. v. 130-36.)

His hot temper appears also in his struggle with Hamlet even in his sister's grave, and his passionate rebuke of that churlish priest who sought to oust God from His judgment-seat and condemn the dead.

" Lay her i' the earth ;
And from her fair and unpolled flesh
May violets spring ! I tell thee, churlish priest,
A ministering angel shall my sister be,
When thou liest howling. (V. i. 261-65.)

• • • • •
Queen. Sweets to the sweet : farewell !

[*Scattering flowers.*
I hoped thou shouldst have been my Hamlet's wife ;
I thought thy bride-bed to have deck'd, sweet maid,
And not have strew'd thy grave.

Laertes. O, treble woe
Fall ten times treble on that cursed head,
Whose wicked deed thy most ingenious sense
Deprived thee of ! Hold off the earth awhile,
Till I have caught her once more in mine arms :
[*Leaps into the grave.*
Now pile your dust upon the quick and dead,
Till of the flat a mountain you have made,
To o'ertop old Pelion, or the skyish head
Of blue Olympus." (V. i. 266-77.)

What a contrast is here—the plaintive undertones of the broken-hearted woman, who felt her own sin doubly at the grave of the innocent dead, and the fierce cry of anguish of the strong, fearless man, so sorrowful and so indignant at his sister's untimely end !

His hot-blooded love of pleasure.

It was probably this that led him to the gay city of Paris.

Polonius hints at it (II. i. 60), and so does Ophelia, who seems to have heard or noticed that her brother was fond of "the primrose path of dalliance."

(I. iii. 46-50.)

His treachery to Hamlet.

The unbated foil is the King's idea.

The poisoned point is Laertes' own refinement of villany.

It is hard to defend Laertes here, especially when we consider his reply to Hamlet's frank and gentlemanly apology for the death of Polonius, which ends—

"*Hamlet.* Sir, in this audience,
Let my disclaiming from a purposed evil
Free me so far in your most generous thoughts,
That I have shot mine arrow o'er the house,
And hurt my brother. (V. ii. 251-55.)

"*Laertes.* I am satisfied in nature,
Whose motive, in this case, should stir me most
To my revenge: but in my terms of honour
I stand aloof; and will no reconciliation,
Till by some elder masters, of known honour,
I have a voice and precedent of peace,
To keep my name ungored. But till that time,
I do receive your offer'd love like love,
And will not wrong it." (V. ii. 255-63.)

Here we see his punctilious sense of honour or of the laws of honour. I fear this had more punctilio than honour in it, for while he uttered these words he held in his hand the unbated and poisoned foil. Perhaps we may make some excuse for Laertes—

a. His furious desire for revenge for his father's murder and his sister's madness overcame all his better feelings, and made him for a time as mad as Hamlet.

b. The masterly cunning of the King bewitched him by working on his most tender feelings, and so won him over to his plan.

"*King.* Laertes, was your father dear to you ?
Or are you like the painting of a sorrow,
A face without a heart ?" (IV. vii. 108-10.)

The Contrast—Hamlet v. Laertes.

HAMLET—

1. Loves the studious life of Protestant Wittenberg.
2. Is familiar with folios and philosophers.
3. Is solitary and far from a *beau camarade*.
4. Is a philosopher.
5. Is full of scruples, and much troubled with the difficulties of life.
6. Is slow and hesitating in revenging his father.
6. Dies forgiving Laertes.

LAERTES—

1. Loves the gaiety of Catholic Paris.
2. Is too familiar with coquettes and grisettes.
3. Is good company, and likes it.
4. Has no idea of philosophy.
5. Knows no scruples, and fears no difficulties.
6. Sweeps to his revenge at a moment's notice.
7. Dies penitent for his treachery, and asking forgiveness.

HORATIO.

Horatio is an honest, brave, modest, steady-going man, without much ability, originality, or energy.

His honesty.

"He is a continent, upon which Hamlet finds that he can securely walk, the only domain in Denmark that is not honeycombed with pitfalls."—*Weiss*.

Cf. V. ii. 64.

We may illustrate his honesty from the fact that he is the only person Hamlet did or could trust.

"One scene of it comes near the circumstance
Which I have told thee of my father's death."
(III. ii. 81-2.)

Horatio kept this secret well, but, though Hamlet says that after the play-scene

“ we will both our judgements join
In censure of his seeming ” (*ib.* 91-2),

Horatio has no plan to propose, and nothing comes of it.

Horatio as a lay figure.

For the greater part of the play Horatio is a mere echo of Hamlet.

At the beginning of the play, after seeing the Ghost and trying to speak to it, he informs Hamlet, and so leads to the interview on which the course of the play depends.

At the end of the play he receives Hamlet's dying words, and undertakes to vindicate his memory.

If we take his answers in the graveyard scene for instance, or in V. ii., they are almost all the insipid echoes of a mere walking gentleman.

Hamlet, though in the passage below he speaks highly of Horatio as an intimate friend, derives no real help from him.

Indeed, in spite of Hamlet's eulogy, Horatio is always inferior in rank to his prince, and should be regarded as a loyal, modest, and contented subject.

Perhaps it is necessary for the development of the play that Horatio should possess but little energy or ability, for otherwise he would have thrown Hamlet into the shade.

His devotion to Hamlet.

This is shown by his readiness to drink of the poisoned cup when he saw his friend was dying.

“ *Hamlet.* Horatio, I am dead ;
Thou livest : report me and my cause aright
To the unsatisfied.

Horatio. Never believe it :
I am more an antique Roman than a Dane :
Here's yet some liquor left.” (V. ii. 349-53.)

His bravery.

This is sufficiently proved by his readiness in advancing to the Ghost to question it.

Cowden Clarke considers this character "the only spot of sunlight in the play."

I cannot accept the view of Hudson, who looks on him as "one of the very noblest and most beautiful of Shakespeare's male characters."

He must have based his estimate on Hamlet's praise of Horatio, which is perhaps as prejudiced as his denunciation of Claudius. We will quote it here, as it illustrates the virtues of both friends with more or less truth.

"*Hamlet.* Horatio, thou art e'en as just a man
As e'er my conversation coped withal.

Horatio. O, my dear lord——

Hamlet. Nay, do not think I flatter ;
For what advancement may I hope from thee
That no revenue hast but thy good spirits
To feed and clothe thee ? Why should the poor be
flattered ?

No, let the candied tongue lick absurd pomp,
And crook the pregnant hinges of the knee
Where thrift may follow fawning. Dost thou hear ?
Since my dear soul was mistress of her choice
And could of men distinguish, her election
Hath sealed thee for herself ; for thou hast been
As one, in suffering all, that suffers nothing,
A man that fortune's buffets and rewards
Hast ta'en with equal thanks : and blest are those
Whose blood and judgement are so well commingled,
That they are not a pipe for fortune's finger
To sound what stop she please. Give me that man
That is not passion's slave, and I will wear him
In my heart's core, ay, in my heart of heart,
As I do thee." (III. ii. 59-78.)

Horatio may have been all that Hamlet says he was ; but, judging simply from the play, as I have to do, I cannot rate him so highly.

THE KING.

Claudius has two sides in his character.

A. As shown by his words and deeds in the play.

B. As depicted—perhaps distorted—by the Ghost and Hamlet.

A.—As shown by his words and deeds.

As a king.

He bears himself with all the dignity of a king, as though to the manner born, seems perfectly successful in foreign affairs, and is most condescending and winning of speech to his ministers and subjects.

It is true the *émeute* of Laertes, in which the mob demand Laertes for their king, may point to domestic discontent; but for all that Claudius seems to have been a better king than Hamlet would have been, in spite of the statement of Fortinbras, who naturally flattered the man who had done his best to secure him the rather unstable throne of Denmark :

“For he was likely, had he been put on,
To have proved most royally.”

(V. ii. 408-9.)

If Hamlet had become king, we fear the historian would have inscribed as his epitaph—“*Omniumque consensu capax imperii, si non imperasset*” (*Tac.*).

As a man.

He is shrewd, penetrating, brave, cool-headed, cautious, prompt in action, infinite in resource, and a perfect master of the art of conspiracy and fascination.

To the Queen his language is considerate, and at times even tender; *e.g.* he almost always, whether in public or private, addresses her as “dear Gertrude.” Some hold that after the play-scene he fancied she had a suspicion of his guilt, and therefore ceased to

care for her, so that when she dies he does not notice it.

But there seems to be little to justify this view in V. ii., and I cannot trace any coldness in his language to her after the play-scene.

1. *His Penetration.*

He has suspicious doubts about Hamlet's madness, which he certainly will not ascribe to love.

"*King.* Love ! his affections do not that way tend ;
Nor what he spake, though it lack'd form a little,
Was not like madness. There's something in his soul,
O'er which his melancholy sits on brood ;
And I do doubt the hatch and the disclose
Will be some danger." (III. i. 170-75.)

After all, he came nearest the truth in respect of the cause of Hamlet's madness, while the last two lines indicate his wary anxiety about his own safety.

2. *His bravery and coolness.*

These qualities are fully exhibited in his reception of Laertes, when he forces his way into the palace at the head of a body of rebels.

"*King.* What is the cause, Laertes,
That thy rebellion looks so giant-like ?
Let him go, Gertrude ; do not fear our person :
There's such divinity doth hedge a king,
That treason can but peep to what it would,
Acts little of his will." (IV. v. 120-24.)

His caution.

In dealing with Hamlet he shows great caution and self-control. He knew that his nephew was "loved of the distracted multitude," and that his own throne depended on his popularity, and therefore he does not boldly put Hamlet to death, though this would otherwise have been his best policy.

To his desire to be popular I ascribe his general affability, for it is necessary for a monarch with a weak title to be conciliatory. (*Cf.* Henry IV.)

3. *His ingenuity and promptness.*

a. He is never at a loss.

When he finds Hamlet's madness attracting too much attention, he at once arranges for his departure to England, and that with a special mission to collect arrears of tribute, so that the public may have no suspicion.

"I have in quick determination

Thus set it down : he shall with speed to England."
(III. i. 176-77.)

b. When Hamlet shows his hand in the play-scene Claudius hurries on his departure. (III. iii. 166-67.)

c. When Hamlet makes his one false move his destruction is immediately planned.

"Follow him a foot : tempt him with speed aboard ;

Delay it not ; I'll have him hence to-night :

Away ! for every thing is seal'd and done

That else leans on the affair : pray you, make haste."
(IV. iii. 55-8.)

d. When all his plans against Hamlet have failed, he at once arranges the duel on hearing of his return from sea.

Here he shows his cunning in working on Hamlet's love of fencing and pride in his skill.

Finally, to make assurance doubly sure, the poisoned cup is prepared.

His power of fascination.

It is only thus we can account for the ascendancy he gained over the Queen.

We have seen him to be a clever and versatile man, and therefore it is probable that in conversation and manner he must have been extremely agreeable, even supposing him as ugly as depicted by Hamlet.

Cf. "*Ghost*. With witchcraft of his wit, with traitorous gifts,—

O wicked wit and gifts, that have the power
So to seduce,—won to his shameful lust
The will of my most seeming-virtuous queen."

(I. v. 43-6.)

He exercised the same fascination on Laertes, and
won that otherwise honest heart to join him in his
conspiracy.

Note the insinuating skill with which he works on his
love for his father.

"*King.* Laertes, was your father dear to you ?
Or are you like the painting of a sorrow,
A face without a heart ?" (IV. vii. 108-10.)

Some good traits in his character.

We see he was no case-hardened villain like Richard
III. and Macbeth in his latter days, from—

- i. His confusion and flight in the play-scene.
- ii. His moments of contrition.
- iii. His conscience-stirred uneasiness.

ii. *His moments of contrition.*

Though these did not lead to repentance, conscience
was not dead in Claudius.

Some of the sternest denunciations of his crime may
be taken from his own words. *E.g.*—

"*Polonius.* 'Tis too much proved—that with de-
votion's visage
And pious action we do sugar o'er
The devil himself.

King (aside). O, 'tis too true !
How smart a lash that speech doth give my con-
science !

The harlot's cheek, beautied with plastering art,
Is not more ugly to the thing that helps it
Than is my deed to my most painted word."

(III. i. 47-53.)

"O, my offence is rank, it smells to heaven ;
 It hath the primal eldest curse upon 't,
 A brother's murder. Pray can I not,
 Though inclination be as sharp as will :
 My stronger guilt defeats my strong intent ;
 And, like a man to double business bound,
 I stand in pause where I shall first begin,
 And both neglect. What if this cursed hand
 Were thicker than itself with brother's blood,
 Is there not rain enough in the sweet heavens
 To wash it white as snow ? Whereto serves mercy
 But to confront the visage of offence ?
 And what's in prayer but this two-fold force,
 To be forestalled ere we come to fall,
 Or pardon'd being down ? Then I'll look up :
 My fault is past. But, O, what form of prayer
 Can serve my turn ? ' Forgive me my foul murder ' ?
 That cannot be ; since I am still possess'd
 Of those effects for which I did the murder,
 My crown, mine own ambition and my queen.
 May one be pardon'd and retain the offence ?
 In the corrupted currents of this world
 Offence's gilded hand may shove by justice,
 And oft 'tis seen the wicked prize itself
 Buys out the-law : but 'tis not so above ;
 There is no shuffling, there the action lies
 In his true nature ; and we ourselves compell'd,
 Even to the teeth and forehead of our faults,
 To give in evidence. What then ? what rests ?
 Try what repentance can : what can it not ?
 Yet what can it when one can not repent ?
 O wretched state ! O bosom black as death !
 O limed soul, that, struggling to be free,
 Art more engaged ! Help, angels ! Make assay !
 Bow, stubborn knees ; and, heart with strings of steel
 Be soft as sinews of the new-born babe !
 All may be well." (III. iii. 36-68.)

What a splendid tribute is this to the beauty and the
 happiness of innocence ! What a ghastly picture is it of

the miseries and unavailing struggles of a soul doomed to die in conscious crime !

Well may we say of Claudius that—

“He found no place for repentance, though he sought it carefully with tears.”

iii. *His conscience-stirred uneasiness.*

He had good reason to doubt the stability of his throne.

We see this from—

The popularity of Hamlet.

The support given to Laertes.

The fact that the throne was elective, according to Blackstone.

Cf. “Popped in between the election and my hopes.”

Others hold that the throne depended on the Queen, and that Claudius, like his predecessor, was only “prince consort,” Hamlet being heir-apparent through his mother.

Another illustration of his anxiety is found in—

“O Gertrude, Gertrude,
When sorrows come, they come not single spies,
But in battalions.

* * * * *

O my dear Gertrude, this,
Like to a murdering-piece, in many places
Gives me superfluous death.” (IV. v. 77–96.)

B.—As depicted by the Ghost and Hamlet.

He is a mean, cowardly assassin, contemptible alike in body and mind, a mere brutal, sensual, drunken beast, with all the lustfulness and none of the courage of a beast.

His appearance.

The Ghost and Hamlet both denounce his manners and his ugliness.

E.g. he is a satyr compared with Hyperion, his predecessor.

He is as like his brother as Hamlet is like Hercules.

He is—

“ A mildewed ear
Blasting his wholesome brother.”

(III. iv. 64-5.)

His treachery.

This may be illustrated from—

“ *Hamlet.* A murderer and a villain ;
A slave that is not twentieth part the tithe
Of your precedent lord ; a vice of kings ;
A cutpurse of the empire and the rule,
That from a shelf the precious diadem stole
And put it in his pocket.” (III. iv. 96-101.)

Cf. I. v. 40-90.

With reference to the picture of the king we should notice that—

1. It is derived from his two greatest enemies, and may be exaggerated.
2. Such a contemptible foe ought easily to have been disposed of by Hamlet.
3. Hamlet, though scathing in his language behind Claudius' back, is very mild and gentle to his face.

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